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In this study, we test the indirect and conditional persuasive effects of a broadcast media echo chamber by combining political campaign attack ads with mockery and criticism on a late-night comedy program. A randomized experiment was conducted in which participants ($N = 559$) were assigned to view one of four reconstructed episodes of *Late Night with Seth Meyers*: (a) anti-Trump comedy with anti-Trump campaign ads, (b) anti-Trump comedy with nonpolitical ads, (c) nonpolitical comedy with anti-Trump ads, and (d) nonpolitical comedy with nonpolitical ads. Results suggested that both comedy and ads exert persuasive effects on image perceptions of the candidates that subsequently influence vote intention. Furthermore, effects were largely confined to those who were high in need for cognition. There was no additive benefit to pairing ads with political comedy. The results are discussed regarding their contribution to theories of persuasion and information processing when applied to political comedy and political ads.

The evolution of the mass media environment has transformed the nature of political persuasion. The broadcast model in which most voters tune in to one of three nightly news programs has given way to a high-choice media environment in which politically interested users can select from a wide variety of increasingly ideological outlets and the politically disinterested media consumer can opt out of the political conversation entirely. To accommodate this evolution, political campaigns have diversified the variety of platforms on which they purchase air time (Ridout, Franz, Goldstein, & Feltus, 2012). At the same time, the proliferation of informational entertainment programs has blurred the line between news and entertainment (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001), increasing the probability that politically disinterested media consumers will be exposed to political information through their entertainment programs. The result is a dynamic media environment that challenges traditional models of media effects.

The diversification and fragmentation of information environments creates a circumstance in which viewers might hear a singular perspective reinforced through multiple media. For example, Democrats are much more likely to view late-night talk shows, and these programs tend to have a much higher proportion of Democratic campaign ads (Ridout et al., 2012). This strategic ad buying, when combined with the liberal tone of political comedy (Dagnes, 2012), creates a reinforcing procession of one-sided messages. Furthermore, audiences of political comedy may be too distracted to scrutinize the message (Young, 2008) and, because they are often more likely to rely on heuristic judgments (Becker, 2012), this cascade of one-sided messages may be especially persuasive (Pfau et al., 1998).

The following study assesses the potentially mutually reinforcing persuasive effects of political comedy and political advertising. Although the literature on the persuasive effects of political comedy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Becker,

2012; Xenos, Moy, & Becker, 2011; Young, 2008) and campaign advertising (Franz & Ridout, 2007, 2010; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Goldstein & Ridout, 2004; Sides & Vavreck, 2013) is robust, these messages are typically studied in isolation (though see Becker, 2012). The messages themselves, however, are often consumed in a multimessage political information environment. Even when multiple media are incorporated in a study, either they are isolated within experimental conditions (Becker, 2012) or one medium is held constant while the other is manipulated (Yegiyian & Grabe, 2007). Thus, the potentially reinforcing effects of strategic ad buying have not been tested. To assess the persuasive effects of political comedy and political advertising in a more dynamic media environment, we present a randomized between-subjects experiment in which campaign ads and political comedy are manipulated to assess the potentially additive effects of political messages.

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it tests the boundary conditions of persuasive political messages by considering the role of need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982) and the potentially additive effects when comedy and ads reinforce each other. Second, we elucidate the mechanism of these persuasive effects by testing candidate image as a heuristic process (Becker, 2012; Popkin, 1994; Warner & Banwart, 2016) that mediates the influence of these persuasive messages on vote intention. Third, we extend the range of Becker's (2012) study of ads and comedy by comparing them in a new context with different operationalizations of the independent and dependent variables.

By using a constructed television show, our study presents a novel operationalization of both political comedy and campaign ads that overcomes the important limitations of survey-based ad studies (Arceneaux, 2010). Although it is typical for experimental studies of political comedy (e.g., Baumgartner, Morris, & Walth, 2012; Becker, 2012; Morris, 2009; Xenos et al., 2011) and ads (e.g., Bartels, 2014; Becker, 2012; Fernandes, 2013; Kaid, 2004) to test message effects in isolation of the broader information environment, our constructed stimulus joins Yegiyian and Grabe (2007) as one of few to examine political ad effects embedded within a broader political information environment. Even though Yegiyian and Grabe (2007) embedded ads in a broadcast of *World News Tonight* (ABC News), they did not manipulate the content of the television program and thus did not test whether campaign ads can reinforce the messages in political programs. Similarly, although Becker (2012) tested the persuasive effects of ads against political comedy and traditional news, her study followed the stacked ads procedure in which a series of campaign ads were presented in succession rather than embedded in an actual television program. Hence, her study did not capture the blended media environment created when campaigns buy ads on programs containing persuasive political messages. We therefore believe that our study is the first to experimentally test the potentially reinforcing

effects of campaign ads and persuasive political programing. In what follows, we review the existing literature on the persuasive effects of campaign ads and political comedy before presenting an experiment designed to test the unique and additive effects of political ads and political comedy.

POLITICAL MEDIA EFFECTS

Both campaign ads and political comedy exert persuasive influence on the attitudes of viewers. Franz and Ridout (2010) suggested that ad exposure is best understood through a dosage-resistance model of persuasion in which exposure to ads creates conditions for persuasion that are constrained by the resistance of the message receivers. The more exposure, according to this model, the more opportunity for persuasion. Gerber, Gimple, Green, and Shaw (2011) argued that ads persuade viewers by priming certain considerations about a candidate so that these considerations are more salient when viewers are asked to form a candidate evaluation. Ads thus prompt viewers to either place certain considerations into working memory or more heavily weight considerations already in working memory. Following the lead of Gerber et al. (2011), Hill, Lo, Vavreck, and Zaller (2013) theorized that ads persuade viewers through a mix of memory-based effortful processing of the messages and instantaneous online updating of global affective evaluations of candidates. Even though Hill et al. (2013) argued that the rapid decay of ad effects suggests very little effortful processing of campaign ads, a follow-up analysis by Bartels (2014) provides compelling evidence that the decay of ad effects is indicative of counterarguing and thus that effortful processing of ad messages is in fact a probable route for persuasion.

The empirical record supports the theoretical prediction of small but clear persuasive effects of political ads (Franz & Ridout, 2007, 2010; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Goldstein & Ridout, 2004; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). Although ad effects tend to be marginal (Goldstein & Ridout, 2004), campaign ads can exert enough influence to be decisive in close races. For instance, an increase in ad buys by the campaign for Al Gore would have needed to shift the vote by only 0.009% in Florida to change the outcome of the 2000 U.S. presidential election (Gordon & Hartmann, 2013). Conversely, Sides and Vavreck (2013) projected that increases in Mitt Romney's advertising would have been insufficient to overcome his deficit in several key states in 2012. In the 2016 U.S. election, Fowler, Ridout, and Franz (2016) found that political ads likely had a minimal influence on the outcome, perhaps because of the untraditional media strategy deployed by Donald Trump.

The persuasive effects of political comedy have also been the focus of academic research, though arguably to a lesser degree than political ads. Like

ads, political comedy is believed to generate persuasive effects through two routes—by increasing the relevant information people bring to bear when forming attitudes and by providing partisan cues that viewers use to update their global affective evaluation of the target of political humor (Kim & Vishak, 2008; Warner, Hawthorne, & Hawthorne, 2015). Furthermore, political comedy may be more persuasive than political ads because, though people are apt to counterargue the content of ads with which they disagree (Bartels, 2014), political comedy is less likely to encounter this motivated scrutiny. The act of decoding the humor in a joke is an intellectually taxing exercise (Young, 2008). Because people are devoting their processing capacity to decoding humor, they have less cognitive ability to counterargue and thus are more likely to be affected by the persuasive content of the comedic messages (Becker, 2012; Young, 2008). To wit, Becker (2012) tested the effects of viewing Stephen Colbert's Juvenalian satire (defined as aggressive, negative, other-focused comedy) on attitudes toward John McCain and found that, compared to traditional political ads, satire resulted in greater reductions in favorability toward McCain.

Further evidence of the persuasive effects of political comedy can be found in research demonstrating that Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live* reduced evaluations of Palin (Baumgartner et al., 2012), mockery on *The Daily Show* reduced evaluations of both George W. Bush and John Kerry in 2004 (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and lopsided criticism of the 2004 Republican National Convention reduced evaluations of Republican candidates (Morris, 2009). Similarly, Xenos et al. (2011) found that criticism on *The Daily Show* reduced evaluations of then U.S. House of Representative speaker Nancy Pelosi.

To summarize, previous experiments have demonstrated the persuasive effects of ads (Bartels, 2014; Fernandes, 2013; Kaid, 2004) and political comedy (Baumgartner et al., 2012; Morris, 2009; Xenos et al., 2011), and one has even compared the effects of comedy to ads (Becker, 2012). Nevertheless, the shifting strategic landscape created by the high-choice media environment invites new questions about the ways in which comedy and ads interact to enhance the persuasive effects of these mutually reinforcing messages. Late-night talk shows are a theoretically interesting media context precisely because they invite strategic ad buying from Democratic campaigns. Like many TV audiences, viewers of late-night comedy tend to be more Democratic but, unlike most heavily Democratic TV audiences, they are also more likely to vote (see Ridout et al., 2012, p. 7). Perhaps because of this strategic opportunity, late-night comedy programs have tended to exhibit the greatest imbalance of Democratic campaign ads—with the *Late Show*, the *Tonight Show*, and *Late Night* among the top five advantage programs for Gore in 2000 and *Last Call with Carson Daily*, the *Late Late Show with Craig Kilborn*, *Conan O'Brien*, the *Late Show with David Letterman*, and *Saturday Night Live* as top advantage

shows for Kerry in 2004 (cf. Ridout et al., 2012). Although no comparable analysis yet exists for the 2012 or 2016 elections, the considerable advantages in ads aired by the Clinton campaign (Fowler et al., 2016) suggest that viewers of late-night comedy programs were far more likely to see ads from the Clinton campaign.

Because late-night comedy tends to be liberal in tone (Dagnes, 2012), the strategic purchasing of airtime on these programs by Democratic campaigns creates persuasive echo chambers. Echo chambers should result in greater persuasion because people learn more novel reasons to support a position and because the presence of multiple sources creates the impression that arguments are being corroborated (Sunstein, 2009). It is possible, for example, that a comedian could introduce a line of attack that, when picked up by a political ad, will have greater credibility and salience when compared to an ad aired in isolation. Because political persuasion tends to operate by communicating information about the character of the candidates (Popkin, 1994), candidate image is a key mediator of the influence of persuasive messages on vote preference (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Warner & Banwart, 2016). Hence, we hypothesize the following:

- H1: Exposure to criticism of a political candidate via (a) political comedy, (b) political ads, and (c) the combination of advertising and comedy will result in lower evaluations of that candidate's image.

Furthermore, because political comedy should result in less counterarguing when compared to political ads (Bartels, 2014; Becker, 2012; Young, 2008), we expect the following:

- H2: Political comedy will result in a larger reduction in candidate image evaluation when compared to political ads.

As just described, the combination of ads and comedy should enhance persuasion because more information from multiple sources will create a persuasive echo chamber. Hence, the following:

- H3: The effects of campaign ads and political comedy will be additive such that viewing them in combination will result in larger persuasive effects when compared to either in isolation.

Because vote intention is in part a consequence of perceptions of a candidate's image (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Popkin, 1994; Warner & Banwart, 2016), we also expect the following:

H4: The effects of (a) political comedy, (b) political ads, and (c) the combination of both on vote intention will be indirect through image evaluation.

Although there is considerable evidence that campaign ads influence candidate image perceptions (Kaid, 2004; Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter, 2011) and initial evidence that political comedy does the same (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006), there is no indication of whether these messages influence some traits more than others. Warner and Banwart (2016) argued that this is an important limitation of the literature on political campaign effects, especially given the variability in the relative importance of individual traits. For example, in examining support for eight candidates, they found that the homophily of the candidate (the perception of similarity in values and worldview) was almost always the most important trait, whereas intelligence was not associated with support for any of the eight candidates they examined. By understanding which traits are most influenced by campaign communication we can better explain the mechanisms that underlie persuasive effects. Because most research on candidate image has focused on the global construct rather than individual facets, disaggregating campaign effects by individual personality traits is an exploratory endeavor and thus we ask the following:

RQ1: Will (a) political comedy, (b) political ads, and (c) the combination of the two affect some image traits more than others?

The persuasive influence of political campaign communication should also be conditioned by an individual's need for cognition. Individuals high in need for cognition enjoy effortful consideration of new information and therefore evaluate messages differently than those low in need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Typically, more effortful processing is often associated with more resistance to a persuasive message, as viewers may be motivated to counterargue messages with which they disagree (Taber & Lodge, 2006). However, because understanding political comedy is cognitively taxing, we expect that those higher in need for cognition will be more likely to expend the effort required to decode the messages. Furthermore, because their effort is directed at getting the joke, we also expect argument scrutiny to be lower (Young, 2008). We also expect those who more carefully attend to the content of political ads to be more persuaded in the short term (Hill et al., 2013). Even though partisans counterargue messages with which they disagree, the immediate effect of an ad is often message-consistent persuasion. Counterarguing causes these persuasive effects to decay only after people have been given time to scrutinize the content (Bartels, 2014). Hence, the immediate effects of persuasion should be strongest among those motivated to process the messages:

H5: The persuasive effects of (a) political comedy, (b) political ads, and (c) the combination of the two will be strongest among those higher in need for cognition.

METHOD

Procedure

In September 2016, a randomized laboratory between-subjects posttest-only experiment was conducted to investigate the hypotheses and research questions. Participants were recruited from communication and journalism courses at one southern and two midwestern universities. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of four versions of a constructed episode of *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. Each constructed episode contained four segments divided by three 2-minute commercial breaks. Conditions included a combination of political comedy criticizing Donald Trump and ads from Hillary Clinton's campaign and Priorities USA, a super PAC supporting Clinton's candidacy. The four episodes were configured as follows: (a) political comedy without political ads, (b) political ads without political comedy, (c) political comedy with political ads, and (d) a control condition with neither political comedy nor political ads. After viewing one of the programs, participants completed a survey that included measures of need for cognition, vote intention, partisanship, candidate image evaluations, and a series of normative political attitudes (e.g., cynicism, efficacy) not included in this analysis. The procedure was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri on September 13, 2016.

All four conditions featured an opening monologue about long security lines at airports (2 minutes 6 seconds) and a closing segment in which Meyers participated in a cooking demonstration with *Saturday Night Live* cast member Leslie Jones and chef Carlo Mirarchi (mildly edited for time: 6 minutes 9 seconds). In the two political comedy conditions, the second segment was drawn from Meyers's recurring series *A Closer Look*, in which he discusses a single issue at length. Meyers's August 1 segment titled "Trump attacks the Khan family" (7 minutes 59 seconds) was selected for inclusion because (a) it directly confronted important facets of Trump's image and (b) it was the authors' subjective judgment that it best operationalized persuasive comedy relative to the available alternatives (i.e., it was a strong exemplar of a persuasive case made in a humorous fashion).

In this segment, Meyers mocked and criticized Trump for his controversial comments about Khizr and Ghazala Khan, parents of Humayun Khan, a U.S. Army Captain who was killed while serving in Iraq. In the clip, Meyers

suggested that Trump's attacks demonstrated bigotry, narcissism, and cruelty. Meyers also used the subsequent statements made by Trump to question his understanding of the First Amendment. Toward the latter half of the segment, Meyers showed clips of an interview Trump gave about Russia to suggest that Trump was dishonest and uninformed about foreign policy. The clip concluded by exposing an apparent lie Trump told about having received a letter from the National Football League about a scheduling conflict with the presidential debates. Hence, the segment contained information about Trump's character (trustworthiness), charm (likability), competence, intelligence, and homophily. The third segment in the political comedy condition featured a portion of Meyers's interview with actor Samuel L. Jackson in which Jackson related an unflattering story about Trump that suggested he cheats at golf and lied about having never met Jackson (3 minutes 33 seconds). This clip reinforced the perception that Trump was dishonest (character) and unlikable (charm).

The two nonpolitical comedy conditions replaced the segment on the Khan family with Second Chance Theatre: Wanna Come With, a segment in which current and former *Saturday Night Live* cast members and *Late Night* writers perform a sketch that never aired on *Saturday Night Live* (5 minutes 21 seconds). The Jackson interview was replaced with a discussion of the Wanna Come With skit (6 minutes 27 seconds). All four conditions were roughly 26 minutes long.

Although it is common for many (especially young) people to view political comedy online on a clip-by-clip basis rather than as a full episode aired on television, there is still a substantial broadcast audience. The segments called A Closer Look on *Late Night's* YouTube channel regularly receive close to 1 million views. The episode that featured the segment discussing the Khan family had slightly more than 1 million broadcast viewers (Welch, 2016). Furthermore, clip-based experimental manipulations of political comedy are common in the existing experimental research (e.g., Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Becker, 2012; Kim & Vishak, 2008; Warner et al., 2015). Hence, a study of the effects of political satire that includes the broadcast format is a useful extension of existing research.

All four conditions contained three 2-minute commercial breaks. The political ad conditions were structured such that the first commercial break featured three 30-second political ads and one 30-second commercial ad; the second break featured one 30-second political ad, one 1-minute political ad, and one 30-second commercial ad; and the third break featured two 30-second commercial ads and one 1-minute political ad. The nonpolitical ad conditions replaced all campaign ads with commercial ads.

The political ads were selected from among the handful of ads that had aired by this point in the campaign. We have parenthetically noted which traits each ad possibly targets. The first ad suggested that Trump held prejudices against African Americans (charm, homophily), the second accused him of outsourcing

the manufacturing of his clothing line overseas (homophily), the third highlighted his controversial statements about McCain's POW status (charm), the fourth critiqued Trump for appearing to mock Serge Kovalski for a congenital joint condition (charm, homophily), the fifth suggested that Trump did not have the temperament to navigate national security threats (competence), and the final depicted children watching Trump make potentially cruel or bullying comments (charm, homophily). See the appendix for a list and order of the ads.

Sample and Measures

Participants ($N = 559$) were recruited through communication and journalism classes and compensated for their participation with course credit. The majority ($n = 393$) completed the experiment in the week prior to the first presidential debate, though some ($n = 166$) participated in the days between the first presidential debate and the vice-presidential debate. A majority identified as female ($n = 384$, 69%) and White/Caucasian ($n = 435$, 78%). Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 35 ($M = 19.4$, $SD = 1.36$).

Vote choice was measured by asking respondents, "As the election approaches, where would you say you stand on the candidates," with response options of 1 (*definitely voting Clinton*), 2 (*probably voting Clinton*), 3 (*leaning Clinton*), 4 (*not likely to vote for either*), 5 (*leaning Trump*), 6 (*probably voting Trump*), and 7 (*definitely voting Trump*; $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.95$). Later in the survey, respondents were asked how likely they were to vote for Hillary Clinton ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 2.36$) and Donald Trump ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 2.18$) from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 7 (*very likely*). These three items combined to form a reliable scale ($\alpha = .916$).

Candidate image was measured using a modified version of Warner and Banwart's (2016) six-factor image scale. Respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert-style scale to assess perceptions of Trump's character (... is trustworthy, dishonest, believable; $M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.02$, $\alpha = .794$), intelligence (... is unintelligent, knowledgeable, smart; $M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .851$), leadership (... is strong, poised, a good leader; $M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .779$), charm (... is charismatic, likable, unpleasant; $M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .669$), competence (... is capable, effective, incompetent; $M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.09$, $\alpha = .938$), and homophily (... understands people like me, understands the problems faced by people like me, shares my values; $M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .783$). These six facets were analyzed as unique traits and as an aggregated assessment of Trump's overall image ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .951$).

Need for cognition was measured with five items adapted from Cacioppo, Petty, and Kao (1984): "I would prefer complex to simple problems," "Thinking is not my idea of fun," "I try to anticipate and avoid situations where there is likely a chance I will have to think in depth about something," "Learning new

ways to think doesn't excite me very much," and "I really enjoy a task that involves coming up with new solutions to problems." Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 5 (*very strongly agree*; $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.67$, $Mdn = 3.6$, $\alpha = .733$). To determine whether persuasive effects varied depending on an individual's need for cognition, a grouping variable was created using a median split in which each respondent was categorized as either low ($n = 294$, $M = 3.16$, $SD = 0.42$, $min = 1.4$, $max = 3.6$) or high ($n = 265$, $M = 4.22$, $SD = 0.37$, $min = 3.8$, $max = 5.0$) in need for cognition.

RESULTS

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed (on a 5-point scale) that the episode they watched was funny, enjoyable, and amusing. As all four conditions contained a reconstructed episode of *Late Night*, all should have been rated as funny. The typical respondent agreed that the program was funny ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 0.96$), and there were no differences in agreement depending on which episode was viewed, $F(1, 557) = 2.59$, $p = .108$. Similarly, respondents agreed that the program was enjoyable ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.95$) irrespective of condition, $F(1, 557) = 1.17$, $p = .281$. Finally, participants agreed that the episode was amusing ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.97$) irrespective of condition, $F(1, 557) = 2.48$, $p = .115$.

Tests of Hypotheses

Hypotheses were tested in structural equation modeling using Lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) for R. The results are presented in Table 1. A two-group (high/low need for cognition) model was fit in which candidate image and vote intention were regressed on dummy variables for the three experimental conditions: (a) political comedy, (b) campaign ads, and (c) both political comedy and campaign ads. Party identification was included in the model as a covariate.

The first hypothesis predicted that campaign ads and political comedy would reduce perceptions of Trump's image. H1a, that political comedy would reduce perceptions of Trump's image, was supported for both groups (high/low need for cognition). Among those higher in need for cognition, those who viewed Meyers's criticisms of Trump alone scored Trump's image more than two thirds of a point lower ($B = -.694$, $SE = .19$; 5-point scale) than those in the control condition. For participants lower in need for cognition, viewing political comedy alone also significantly reduced perceptions of Trump's image, but the effect was almost half the size observed for people with higher need for cognition

TABLE 1
Conditional Media Effects for Political Ads and Comedy

Path	Trump Image Perceptions			Intention to Vote for Trump		
	95% CI of B			95% CI of B		
	B (SE)	LLCI	ULCI	B (SE)	LLCI	ULCI
High need for cognition						
Party	.693 (.06)***	.580	.806	.579 (.07)***	.439	.718
Political comedy	-.694 (.19)***	-1.06	-.331	.179 (.19)	-.199	.558
Political ads	-.444 (.20)*	-.833	-.054	-.020 (.19)	-.392	.352
Both	-.403 (.19)*	-.773	-.032	.368 (.19)	-.005	.742
Image				.666 (.10)***	.468	.864
R ²		.598			.792	
Low need for cognition						
Party	.554 (.05)***	.449	.659	.603 (.08)***	.457	.749
Political comedy	-.391 (.18)*	-.737	-.045	.144 (.19)	-.233	.520
Political ads	-.017 (.17)	-.357	.324	.002 (.18)	-.357	.361
Both	-.100 (.17)	-.441	.241	.078 (.18)	-.273	.429
Image				.988 (.10)***	.785	1.19
R ²		.445			.815	

Note. All estimates produced in structural equation modeling using a robust maximum likelihood estimator in Lavaan. Model fit for the structural model was adequate: $\chi^2(106) = 330.59, p < .001$, root mean square error of approximation = .087, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.077, .098], comparative fit index = .955, non-normed fit index/Tucker–Lewis index = .939, standardized root mean square residual = .037. CIs were generated using 5,000 bootstrapped resamples with a maximum likelihood estimator. LLCI = lower limit CI; ULCI = upper limit CI.

Statistical significance was determined through nested model comparisons using the chi-square difference test: * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

($B = -.391, SE = .18$). H1b predicted that political ads would reduce perceptions of Trump’s image. This hypothesis was supported only for those higher in need for cognition, who scored Trump’s image almost half a point lower ($B = -.444, SE = .20$) relative to the control condition. Those in the low need for cognition group did not significantly change their perceptions of Trump. H1c predicted that the combination of political comedy and political ads would significantly reduce perceptions of Trump. Again, this was supported only for those high in need for cognition ($B = -.403, SE = .19$). H2 predicted that political comedy would be more persuasive than political ads. The results just reported are consistent with this hypothesis; only political comedy influenced people low in need for cognition and, for those high in need for cognition, the coefficient was substantively larger (a difference of .205). H3 predicted that the largest effects would be observed for those in the combined condition. However, as just reported, effect

sizes of the combined condition were comparable to the ads alone condition for those high in need for cognition and did not influence the perceptions of those low in need for cognition.

H4 predicted that the effects of ads and comedy on vote intention would be indirect through perceptions of Trump's image. Image assessments were significantly associated with intention to vote for Trump for both those higher in need for cognition ($B = .666$, $SE = .10$) and those lower in need for cognition ($B = .988$, $SE = .10$). After accounting for the influence of candidate image, none of the experimental conditions directly influenced vote intention. However, all three conditions indirectly influenced vote intention through their effects on image perceptions. Indirect effects were tested by drawing 5,000 bootstrapped resamples of the product of direct effects. The comedy condition was significantly associated with lower intention to vote for Trump through its effect on perceptions of his image, 95% confidence interval (CI) $[-.776, -.223]$, as was the ads condition, 95% CI $[-.575, -.046]$. The combination of comedy and ads was also likely to indirectly influence vote intention, 95% CI $[-.538, -.024]$. For those low in need for cognition, only political comedy indirectly influenced vote intention through image, 95% CI $[-.776, -.035]$. Findings were consistent with H5; the effects were strongest among those higher in need for cognition.

The research question asked whether political comedy and ads would influence individual facets of candidate image differently. To test this, a multivariate latent path model was fit in which each of the six image traits were specified as latent variables and regressed on dummy variables for the three experimental conditions as well as a covariate for partisan identification. The results are reported in Table 2. As would be expected based on the findings just reported, the persuasive messages generally did not influence people lower in need for cognition. The condition with only political comedy did modestly reduce evaluations of Trump's character among those low in need for cognition, but evaluations of his other five traits were unchanged and the other two experimental conditions did not significantly alter even character evaluations. Among those higher in need for cognition, political comedy reduced evaluations of Trump's character, intelligence, leadership, competence, and homophily but not his charm. Conversely, political ads reduced evaluations of Trump's charm but not the other five traits. The condition with both political comedy and political ads resulted in significant reductions in evaluations of Trump's character and competence but not the other four traits. A summary of the results of each hypothesis tested is presented in Table 3.

TABLE 2
Conditional Media Effects for Political Ads and Comedy on Individual Image Traits

Path	High Need for Cognition			Low Need for Cognition		
	B (SE)	95% CI of B		B (SE)	95% CI of B	
		LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI
Character						
Party	.604 (.06)***	.514	.735	.506 (.05)***	.413	.626
Political comedy	-.767 (.19)***	-1.193	-.382	-.378 (.19)*	-.774	-.025
Political ads	-.421 (.23)	-.909	.007	.098 (.19)	-.276	.475
Both	-.545 (.20)**	-.972	-.153	.085 (.18)	-.274	.451
R ²	.534			.409		
Intelligence						
Party	.473 (.05)***	.379	.589	.401 (.05)***	.316	.504
Political comedy	-.653 (.20)**	1.065	-.253	-.374 (.19)	-.769	.002
Political ads	-.328 (.22)	-.774	.114	-.128 (.18)	-.492	.239
Both	-.381 (.19)	-.784	.023	-.257 (.19)	-.655	.13
R ²	.415			.294		
Leadership						
Party	.591 (.06)***	.49	.736	.457 (.05)***	.362	.576
Political comedy	-.552 (.22)*	-1.023	-.129	-.320 (.20)	-.985	.008
Political ads	-.444 (.23)	-.928	.008	-.210 (.19)	-.594	.168
Both	-.295 (.21)	-.744	.104	-.179 (.19)	-.565	.211
R ²	.521			.350		
Likability						
Party	.494 (.06)***	.397	.632	.535 (.08)***	.401	.733
Political comedy	-.412 (.28)	-.897	.037	-.461 (.24)	-.985	.008
Political ads	-.553 (.22)*	-.988	-.127	.076 (.23)	-.39	.538
Both	-.147 (.22)	-.585	.301	.035 (.21)	-.393	.464
R ²	.441			.436		
Competence						
Party	.657 (.06)***	.553	.808	.480 (.06)***	.372	.624
Political comedy	-.576 (.21)**	-1.012	-.164	-.333 (.19)	-.717	.041
Political ads	-.396 (.22)	-.846	.037	-.137 (.19)	-.524	.244
Both	-.443 (.21)*	-.864	-.039	-.277 (.19)	-.677	.103
R ²	.570			.372		
Homophily						
Party	.638 (.05)***	.546	.761	.563 (.06)***	.456	.687
Political comedy	-.446 (.18)*	-.824	-.086	-.288 (.17)	-.633	.044
Political ads	-.271 (.19)	-.67	.132	.115 (.16)	-.219	.437
Both	-.064 (.18)	-.428	.311	.156 (.17)	-.187	.500
R ²	.559			.459		

Note. All estimates produced in structural equation modeling using a robust maximum likelihood estimator in Lavaan. Model fit for the structural model was adequate: $\chi^2(336) = 806.41, p < .001$, root mean square error of approximation = .074, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.068, .081], comparative fit index = .933, non-normed fit index/Tucker–Lewis index = .910, standardized root mean square residual = .047. CIs were generated using 5,000 bootstrapped resamples with a maximum likelihood estimator. LLCI = lower limit CI; ULCI = upper limit CI.

Statistical significance was determined through nested model comparisons using the chi-squared difference test: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3
Summary of Results

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>
H1a Supported	Exposure to criticism of a political candidate via political comedy will result in lower evaluations of that candidate's image.
H1b Partially supported	Exposure to criticism of a political candidate via political ads will result in lower evaluations of that candidate's image.
H1c Partially supported	Exposure to criticism of a political candidate via the combination of advertising and comedy will result in lower evaluations of that candidate's image.
H2 Supported	Political comedy will result in a larger reduction in candidate image evaluation when compared to political ads.
H3 Not supported	The effects of campaign ads and political comedy will be additive such that viewing them in combination will result in larger persuasive effects when compared to either in isolation.
H4 Supported	The effects of political comedy on vote intention will be indirect through image evaluation.
H4b Partially supported	The effects of political ads will be indirect through image evaluation.
H4c Partially supported	The effects of the combination of ads and comedy on vote intention will be indirect through image evaluation.
H5a Supported	The persuasive effects of political ads will be strongest among those higher in need for cognition.
H5b Supported	The persuasive effects of political comedy will be strongest among those higher in need for cognition.
H5c Supported	The persuasive effects of the combination of ads and comedy will be strongest among those higher in need for cognition.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to test the unique and combined persuasive effects of political comedy and political advertising. A between-subjects randomized experiment revealed that both political comedy and political ads generated message-consistent persuasive effects. However, these effects were present only among those higher in need for cognition. In all cases, the effect on vote intention was indirect such that, because the messages reduced evaluations of Trump's image, those in the treatment conditions expressed less intention to vote for Trump. Contrary to expectations, merging political comedy and political ads did not enhance the persuasiveness of the stimuli. Furthermore, there is some preliminary evidence to suggest that, though both political comedy and political ads reduced image perceptions, they acted on different facets of Trump's image. The following discussion explores the implications of these findings and the limitations of this study and proposes directions for future research.

Previous research has demonstrated message-consistent persuasive effects of political comedy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Xenos et al., 2011; Young, 2008) and political ads (Franz & Ridout, 2007, 2010; Fridkin & Kenney, 2011; Goldstein & Ridout, 2004; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). Our findings bolster the well-established principle that comedy and ads can influence evaluations of the target and alter vote intentions. Furthermore, we found political comedy to be more persuasive than political ads. This corroborated Becker's (2012) finding in a different election year (2016 instead of 2008) with a substantively different target (Trump instead of McCain) using a different comedian (Meyers instead of Colbert) and a different form of satire (Colbert used deadpan in 2008) while changing the operationalization of the independent variables (a constructed episode rather than clips and stacked ads) and dependent variables (image and vote intention). As DeAndrea and Holbert (2017) argued, "the more we can establish that theoretical relationships are not dependent on very particular methods or procedures, the more confident we can be in the underlying theory" (p. 172). Hence, our results add substantial credence to Becker's 2012 initial finding that political comedy is more persuasive than campaign advertising.

We also extend scholarly understanding of the persuasive effects of both political comedy and campaign ads by elucidating image as a mechanism of this persuasive effect. In fact, there was no direct effect of the stimuli on vote intention after accounting for the mediating influence of image perceptions. Both the comedy and ad stimuli used controversial moments from Trump's candidacy to argue that he did not possess the ideal characteristics of a presidential candidate. These persuasive messages accommodate low-information rationality by focusing on perceptions of Trump's traits to make voting for him seem less desirable. Our results do not rule out other possible persuasive mechanisms; the stimuli were selected in part because of their heavy reliance on image-based attacks. Nevertheless, the findings support the theory of image reasoning articulated by Popkin (1994) and advanced by Warner and Banwart (2016). That this process appears to operate for both ads and political comedy suggests that this theory is broadly applicable to a variety of persuasive campaign contexts.

Our findings further extend research on political comedy and campaign ads by illustrating that need for cognition aids persuasion in each context. Although political comedy influenced people who were both high and low in need for cognition, the effects were larger for those who enjoyed effortful thinking. The two conditions containing persuasive ads were influential only for those higher in need for cognition. This is perhaps contrary to what one might expect given the view that candidate image traits influence vote intention through a heuristic process in which these cognitive shortcuts reduce the need for effortful thinking (Popkin, 1994). Similarly, comedy should be more persuasive because it reduces argumentative scrutiny, implying a trade-off between message elaboration and persuasion. Despite this, our expectation was that the persuasive effects would be

greatest among those higher in need for cognition. This is because people higher in need for cognition engage in more issue-relevant cognitive engagement (Geers & Lassiter, 2003). In the short run, some level of cognitive engagement should be necessary to decode and internalize the persuasive messages. Over a longer period, viewers of political ads should scrutinize the messages, and thus the persuasive effects can be expected to decay (Bartels, 2014). However, it is possible that the effects observed in the comedy condition would be less likely to decay over time because argument scrutiny of comedic messages is lower (Young, 2008) and because comedy may experience a sleeper effect (Nabi, Moyer-Guse, & Byrne, 2007). Future research should integrate a subsequent measurement occasion to assess whether comedy effects decay less than ad effects.

Our finding that those higher in need for cognition engage in more effortful processing is a fundamental shift in the way image reasoning (Warner & Banwart, 2016) and low-information rationality (Popkin, 1994) are thought to operate. This suggests that candidate image traits may be the central focus of effortful thinking. As Parry-Giles (2010) observed, campaigns are about people. Whether a candidate is honest, intelligent, competent, or a good leader is fundamental to vote choice; these traits are more than peripheral cues. This does not suggest, however, that image traits cannot function as cognitive shortcuts. In fact, an inspection of Table 1 suggests that those low in need for cognition appeared to rely more heavily on candidate image in deciding vote choice. Instead, our findings point to a dual-processing role for candidate image consistent with previous research about campaign ads (Hill et al., 2013) and political comedy (Kim & Vishak, 2008). Image traits may function as heuristics for those unlikely to engage in effortful thinking, but they can also be the focus of careful consideration.

Our study is also novel in that we disaggregated image into individual traits to explore possible differences in the effects of ads versus comedy. Political comedy affected five of six traits (all but charm), whereas political ads affected only charm. This may have been a result of the stimuli, as the themes present in the attack ads seemed to focus on the likability of Trump, whereas the themes in the comedy condition touched on a broader array of traits. The design of the study makes it difficult to distinguish the effects of the form of persuasive message from the actual content; we cannot say whether the presence of humor changes which traits are affected or if it is merely a difference in the content of the arguments. Future studies should therefore attempt to isolate features that are most likely to influence perceptions of individual traits.

Finally, our study is the only one we are aware of to have tested the combined influence of political ads and political comedy. Given the proliferation of entertainment media, the blurring of the lines between entertainment and news media (Delli Carpini & Williams, 2001), and the diversification of campaign ad buys

(Ridout et al., 2012), it is increasingly likely that people will encounter mutually reinforcing political information from their entertainment programming and the ads aired during these programs. Our findings suggest that the combination of political comedy and ads do not enhance persuasion. Instead, we found that combining comedy and ads resulted in essentially the same amount of persuasion as ads alone, and each of these effects were smaller than that produced by political comedy alone.

This finding contradicted our expectations. The presence of both ads and comedy diversifies the number of sources delivering persuasive messages, increases the amount of information presented, and increases the variety of arguments being advanced. If our theory was correct, we should have observed the greatest persuasion in the combined condition. It is possible that our finding resulted from an invalid test of the theory; we may not have effectively manipulated a persuasive echo chamber. Conversely, it may indicate that our theoretical expectations need to be recalibrated. Political comedy is thought to persuade in part because argumentative scrutiny is dormant (Young, 2008). Work on inoculation demonstrates that when people feel that their attitudes are threatened by a persuasive message, they are motivated to defend their beliefs (Pfau, 1992; Pfau & Burgoon, 1988). Ads may have triggered a perception of threat and thus attitude defense. Campaign ads may also trigger psychological reactance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981) if some participants sensed that the ads were attempting to constrain their beliefs and thus felt compelled to defend their freedom of choice. Hence, the ads may have invoked a level of scrutiny that, once activated, was equally applied to all messages.

Although these explanations are speculative and post hoc, they are consistent with the observed data. Future research should explore the possibility that campaign ads trigger argumentative scrutiny, arouse a perceived belief-threat, and/or trigger psychological reactance. These processes may indicate that not only do ads have limited persuasive potential but they undermine persuasion created by earned media. For practitioners, this would present a quandary. The audience of political satire is ideal for activation: They tend to be more liberal and more likely to vote (Ridout et al., 2012). However, if campaigns buy ads on shows that are already delivering messages that achieve campaign goals, these campaigns will be squandering resources and undermining the persuasive potential of their earned media. Campaigns may be wise to focus on late-night programs that tend to avoid politics (e.g., *The Tonight Show*).

As with any study, important limitations qualify our findings. First, we did not include measures of information processing. Future studies should capture the extent to which viewers elaborate on persuasive messages. Second, our use of a convenience sample raises questions about whether the effects we observed would be replicated in an older population. If older adults are more resistant to persuasion, we may expect smaller effects from a more representative sample.

Third, as with any laboratory experiment, there are trade-offs in external validity. People do not typically view political comedy in a classroom with a large audience. Furthermore, it is increasingly common for young people to view political comedy online as individual clips rather than as full episodes. Future research should consider the role of digital advertising on video-sharing platforms. Finally, we are limited by the generalizability of our texts. The political ads included in the stimulus reflect only ads developed by one campaign and one super PAC. As Fowler and colleagues (2016) pointed out, the Clinton ads may have been uniquely ineffective relative to other campaigns. Furthermore, not all political comedy should be expected to function like Meyers's A Closer Look segments. Instead, we see these segments as representative of a specific subform of televised political comedy analogous to John Oliver's long-form segments and other extended treatments (cf. Greenwood, Sorenson, & Warner, 2016). Traditional monologues such as those seen on *The Tonight Show* or *Jimmy Kimmel Live* should be expected to behave similarly to their predecessors (e.g., Baum, 2002).

CONCLUSION

In this study, we demonstrated that attitudes about Donald Trump's image were reduced by critical political comedy and political attack ads. This reduction was associated with less intention to vote for him. We found that these persuasive effects were confined to those who were high in need for cognition and were not magnified when these two forms of campaign media were paired. These findings reinforce the view that, though both ads and comedy are persuasive, comedy appears to have stronger effects (Becker, 2012). The findings also suggest that pairing ads with comedy can undermine the persuasive potential of comedy. We further demonstrate that candidate image is not merely a heuristic cue but something that can be influenced by effortful thinking. Finally, we found preliminary evidence that disaggregating candidate image into individual traits can result in more nuanced descriptions of media effects. As scholars continue to attend to the increasingly complex political information environment fostered by the digital age, differences in both the processing habits of message receivers and the types of outcomes affected by these messages should receive greater attention.

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APPENDIX

Stimulus Used to Construct Experimental Conditions

Political Seth Meyers ^a	Nonpolitical Seth Meyers ^a
A Couple Things (2:06) Ads (2:00)	A Couple Things (2:06) Ads (2:00)
A Closer Look – Khan family (7:59) Ads (2:00)	Second Chance Theatre (5:21) Ads (2:00)
Interview with Samuel L. Jackson (3:33) Ads (2:00)	Second Chance Theatre Q&A (6:27) Ads (2:00)
Cooking with Leslie Jones (6:09)	Cooking with Leslie Jones (6:09)
Political Ads ^a	Nonpolitical Ads ^a
Ad Block A: Everything (0:30) Letterman (0:30) Clash of Clans (0:30) Captured (0:30)	Ad Block A: Clash of Clans (0:30) iPhone (1:00) State Farm (0:30)
Ad Block B: Subway (0:30) Grace (1:00) One Wrong Move (0:30)	Ad Block B: Xfinity (1:00) Galaxy S7 (0:30) Old Navy (0:30)
Ad Block C: Old Navy (0:30) Role Models (1:00) Galaxy S7 (0:30)	Ad Block C: Direct TV (0:30) Android (1:00) Subway (0:30)
Political Ad	Description
Everything (Clinton)	Juxtaposition of Trump appeals to African Americans and 1970s discrimination suits against Trump
Letterman (Clinton)	Footage of Trump and Letterman discussing where Trump Ties were manufactured
Captured (Clinton)	Veterans discussing Trump’s remarks about John McCain
Grace (Priorities USA)	Parents of a disabled child discussing Trump’s mocking of Serge Kovalski
Just One Wrong Move (Clinton)	Footage of Trump’s remarks such as “Bomb the sh*t out of them”
Role Models (Clinton)	Children watching various remarks from Trump on TV

^aValues are (minutes:seconds).